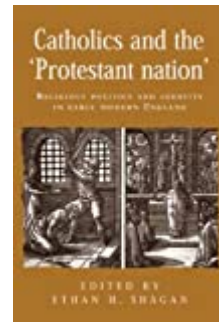


Ethan Shagan, ed. *Catholics and the "Protestant Nation": Religious Politics and Identity in Early Modern England*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. viii + 213 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-5768-7.



Reviewed by Charles Prior (Department of History, University of Hull)

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All in the Same Boat

The editor of this collection made his name with a groundbreaking (and prize-winning) book on the Reformation, whose central lesson for historians concerned the ways in which the local, the personal, and the social could be seen to be connected with larger issues involved in a Reformation that was an act of state.[1] In this collection, Ethan Shagan and his contributors press forward in this direction and bring to it an historiographical agenda. That is, to unite what for so long has been divided, and thus to show how the experience of Protestants and Catholics shared many common features. As Shagan puts it in his introduction, historians have tended to stick to the firm confessional divide defined by Reformation polemics, with the effect that the centrality of Catholics and Catholicism to early modern "English culture" has been overlooked (p. 2). Hence, the aim of the collection is to "re-contextualise English Catholicism within the scholarly world of mainstream English historiography" (p. 18). This would appear to be a tall order, for not only was English Catholicism a rather nebulous phenomenon, but also there is the fact that "English historiography" (which is not to say that of Britain) consists not of one central artery, but of a welter of smaller

streams. Indeed, just what constitutes the "mainstream," or the questions with which it is concerned, are never clearly defined.

As is suggested by the title chosen for them, it emerges that identity and loyalty are central to these essays. Rather than dealing with the entire early modern period, the scope is confined to c. 1530-c. 1630. Hence, the attention of these essays is directed primarily toward the aftermath of the Reformation, and before the first crisis of orthodox Protestantism that took place in the 1640s. There is nothing on the crucial problem of Interregnum Catholicism; no mention of perceptions of Catholics in the period of the Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis; nothing on the Sacheverell affair, or indeed of Catholic Relief Act (1778). In short, readers expecting a truly early modern perspective on the issues at hand will be disappointed.

Nevertheless, the arguments that are presented contain much of interest, and should lead historians to re-examine the way in which they perceive the problem of English Catholicism, as well as the complexity of religious identity. Peter Marshall examines the "dialectical"

processes that shaped the use of the term “Catholic” in the reign of Henry VIII, and concludes that it was both an “unstable category” and a “contested discourse” (p. 42). As Shagan demonstrates, one site of this contest was within the Catholic community itself, as it came to grips with the reality of Reformation. What was to be done with church property seized by Henry VIII, but suddenly back on the market under Mary? Where did Catholics stand on the newly created Church of England and its apostate sovereign? These and other points of contention allow us to see that, like Protestants in the next century, Catholics were far from united on how the life of the spirit should be reconciled with politics and law. This theme is explored in some detail by Michael Questier, who urges us to pay closer attention to the attitudes of the Catholic community toward Elizabeth, and in particular the strictures it cast upon the royal supremacy over the Church and the demands individual Catholics made as members of the commonwealth.

Indeed, it is important to realize the extent to which the Reformation by statute severed Catholics from their own history. As defenders of the Elizabethan *ecclesia Anglicana* maintained, the ancient church established by Christ and handed to the Apostles had been corrupted by Rome, and hence the English branch of reformation represented, as the Act of Supremacy stipulated, a *restoration* of ancient practice. Thomas McCoog points out that Catholics responded with a narrative of persecution, but again disagreed as to who among them were the true victims. In the tales of the martyrs, Catholics found a route in to their own historical past and the ground on which it might be contested. As McCoog argues, “each side sifted through the literary and mortal remains of each martyr as they searched for allies in their battle over the past, present, and future of English Catholicism” (p. 119). Similarly, Peter Lake tackles Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus his Fall* (performed 1604, printed in quarto 1605, in folio 1616) and offers a revision of Quentin Skinner’s version of republicanism as defined by liberty and political virtue. Instead, Jonson’s evocation of Rome was meant to illustrate the tyranny and faction that prevailed at court. Where religion comes to bear is in the disaffection of Catholic “wannabe courtiers,” displaced by James’s Protestant retinue, and hence disposed to vilify it (p. 157). The political world of alienated Catholics is also explored by Johann Sommerville, in an all-too-brief essay on the controversy over the oath of allegiance, in which writers pondered the legality of deposing and even assassinating James VI and I. Finally, Alison Shell examines how Catholics sought to nurture the faith of their children, and in turn de-

rived spiritual solace from the “exemplary” behavior of Catholic youth. Parallels are evident here with the mental world of Protestant piety and Godly virtue.

The value of this collection lies in the fact that it reminds us that the Reformation rendered Catholics as aliens in a Protestant state. They were obliged by law to give their loyalty and allegiance to the Crown, while at the same time they were obliged by the Pope to regard the English Church as “false” and the Crown as heretical. The Crown meanwhile was confronted with *de facto* subjects of a rival confessional power: on what grounds could it demand allegiance? It emerges that this ground had to be built up, and this is the link with the rise of a species of Protestant “nationalism” whose advent and relation to Catholicism is assumed, but not systematically explored, in this collection.[2] This is unfortunate, given Shagan’s opening statements concerning the centrality of Catholicism to the development of early modern English (and presumably Protestant) culture. One element of this culture that might have been explored is that of historical consciousness—the English Church found its place in history by rejecting and revising the historical narratives that sustained the legitimacy of the Roman Church. In England, this was done by elaborating an episcopal history that in turn came to be criticized by Scottish historians as being excessively “popish,” and hence corrupt. At this point it is possible to imagine the ways in which notions of “Britishness”—debated by Protestants—were in turn shaped by Protestant engagement with Catholic historiography. What this meant for the “Protestant nation” alluded to in the title is a question that deserves to be explored.[3]

In the end this is a book about Catholics themselves, and the reaction to the sudden demotion from a dominion of the Church of Rome to a harried diaspora within a Protestant imperial monarchy. Their experiences were not so very different from those disaffected Protestants (what should we call *them*?) who found themselves at odds with the Church established by law. In early modern Britain, God’s house had many heterodoxies.

Notes

[1]. Ethan H. Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See Susan Wabuda. “Review of Ethan H. Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*,” H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, August, 2003 (<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=167051066703551>).

[2]. Alan MacColl, "The Construction of England as a Protestant 'British' Nation in the Sixteenth Century," *Renaissance Studies* 18, no. 4 (2004): 582-608.

[3]. See Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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